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STUDENTS AT EDUCATIONAL RISK: DILEMMAS IN POLICY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract

Internationally and in Australia, students 'at-risk' of underachieving or failing at school have become a focal point of education reform. Solutions for improving educational standards for students 'at-risk' have shifted from a focus on individual intervention-based programs to more systemic policies and strategies. The research reported in this paper explored the complexity of issues related to policy for students at educational risk in Western Australia. Specifically, it analysed the Education Department of Western Australia's policy *Making the Difference: Students at Educational Risk,* from its origins and intent through the production of the policy text to the subsequent practices in schools, focusing on the period of 1997 to 2002. This paper draws on the research findings to examine the competing discourses found within the policy; one that typified current global economic ideologies of decentralization accompanied by re-regulation, performativity and accountability; and a second that accented a new remodelled concept of social justice. Consideration is given to the contradictions and tensions reflected within the policy process, surrounding issues of 'at-risk' between global ideologies and micro site practices associated with 'social justice' and 'economic rationalism'; the construction of 'quality; as 'accountability'; and issues pertaining to the compatibility of 'equality; and 'efficiency'. The paper concludes with recommendations for future directions of research into theory, policy and practice for students 'at-risk'.

Introduction: Contextualizing the Research

Internationally, students 'at-risk' of under-achieving or failing at school have become a focal point of education reform. Educational and social policies associated with issues of 'at-risk' and student performance have been, and continue to be, strongly influenced by how society and politicians define the term 'at-risk', social justice and the purpose of schooling. Internationally, research and literature in the area of students 'at-risk' have focused on two distinctive themes: student 'at-risk' identification, prevention and intervention; and contrasting social and economic underpinnings of approaches to 'at-risk'. Whilst the essence of both themes centre on enhancing the academic potential of the individual, existing within and between these themes are tensions and contradictions which render the concept of 'at-risk' a complex and highly contentious issue.

Throughout the last twenty years global level reforms have influenced education and although these reforms do not negate the nation-state (Marginson 1999), as Commonwealth and State policies are developed to meet local needs (Taylor & Henry 2003), global trends have the potential to influence the direction of more localized policies and practices. Historically, the governance of education, educational policy, curriculum and pedagogy has been the domain of

educationalists (Ranson 2003). However, it has been argued that educators' knowledge is now ignored (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard & Henry 1997) as education embraces a wider political agenda in a global knowledge economy. This shift in the governance of education has been accompanied by new discourses of excellence, efficiency, accountability, competition and self-management. The production of a flexible, educated and skilled population is correlated with increasing a nation's economic advantage in the global market place and reducing the burden placed upon state welfare services. Improving educational standards has become an important goal of educational reform with nationalised testing and tightened accountability processes promoted as means to enhance student achievement. Arguably, in this model of performativity, 'quality' is constructed as 'accountability' and issues relating to social justice, social democracy and human development are remodelled to fit with global economic ideologies. Ideologies related to social cohesion on the one hand, and those that seek to align education with economic prosperity on the other, do not necessarily sit comfortably together, nor guarantee policy uniformity (Ball 2003; Dale 1999), especially when mediated at local levels (Marginson 1997). Within the current educational climate, educational institutions are expected to achieve more outcomes within a climate of diminishing resources and restructuring has foregrounded decentralisation and devolution as processes of providing schools with greater flexibility, powers and responsibilities in their operation and running (Haynes 1997; Karlsen 2000; Knight & Lingard 1997; Osbourne & Gaebler 1992). The research reported in this paper is located within this changing context surrounding education and the concept of 'students at educational risk'.

Aims and Research Questions

The aim of the research reported here was to analyse the Western Australian Education Department's *Students at Educational Risk*: *Making the Difference* (SAER) Policy (EDWA 1998a) from its origins and intent through the production of the policy text to the subsequent practices in Western Australian schools, focusing on the period from 1997 to 2002. The intention of this qualitative study was not to make generalizations about implementation of the SAER Policy in other public schools in WA or about similar policies in other States or countries but to identify emergent issues and themes which may provide 'food for thought' elsewhere as global and local factors interact around policies and practices for students 'at-risk'.

The approach taken to policy analysis in this study is one of 'theoretical eclecticism' (Ball 1997; Ozga 2000; Taylor 1997) where theoretical perspectives are combined to offer "complementary analytic tools" (Vidovich 2002:9). The conceptual framework for this study draws on both critical theory and Foucauldian post-structuralist theoretical insights to achieve a critical analysis of policy that involves acknowledging a balance between the powers of the state on the one hand and individual agency on the other. Bowe, Ball & Gold's (1992) and Ball's (1994) framework of a 'policy cycle' was used to analyse the SAER Policy as it aimed to capture policy's complex and 'messy' process. The 'policy cycle' consists of five contexts: influences, policy text production; practices; outcomes; and political strategies, and these contexts were used to generate the research questions, which were:

- What factors influenced the production of the WA Education Department's SAER Policy?

- What was the nature of the policy text and how was it constructed?

- What were the effects of the SAER Policy on school operations and practices?

- What were the outcomes of the SAER Policy in terms of its impact on social justice?

- What strategies could be employed to further enhance social justice for students 'at-risk'?

The 'policy cycle', combined with a policy trajectory model from macro (Central Office), to meso (District Office) and to micro (school) level perspectives of research, provided a 'toolbox' (Ball 1993; Vidovich 2002; 2007) for policy analysis that allowed for multiple perspectives of policy processes, rather than a single theory. This toolbox for policy analysis was valuable for teasing out how the policy was recontextualised along the policy trajectory and different contexts of the 'policy cycle' and for identifying both resistance and conformity involved in the SAER Policy enactment in WA.

Research Methods

Data triangulation across different levels of the policy trajectory was a key design feature of this study, which highlighted the complexity of power relationships in policy processes. Discourse analysis, as described and understood in critical policy studies, was the main method used to analyse the WA Education Department's SAER Policy text and interview data, and expose the power relations and ideologies of individuals and institutions at the macro, meso and micro levels of the policy process. Interviews were conducted at the macro (Central Office), meso (District Office) and micro (school) levels to investigate how the SAER Policy was interpreted and enacted, along the policy trajectory.

The research sample included three key senior officers from the WA Education Department's Central Office (macro level). Purposeful sampling was used to select these macro level respondents as they had specific information and knowledge about the process under consideration (Hornby & Symon 1994). The research sample also included four primary school case study sites. In this research, a case study approach to research was adapted to portray the different experiences of policy change through highlighting the complexity of different contexts and points of view of individual educational sites (Coffey & Atkinson 1996). Case studies of policy at multiple school sites allowed for cross-case comparison to identify how the localised context of the school acted in response to the change processes intended by the introduction of new policy.

Case studies in this research consisted of meso and macro respondents. In each case study, six respondents were interviewed: one from student services at the District level, and five at a school level, which included the Principal, Deputy Principal, SAER Coordinator and two teachers. To provide maximum variation, purposeful sampling was also used to select four education Districts within WA. The research sample consisted of an education District in the far north of the State of WA where many schools within the District are in isolated locations; an education District in a

rapid growth region south of the State; and two metropolitan education Districts, one on the south side and one on the north side of the capital city. The use of different locations assisted in providing an in-depth understanding into how education Districts (and case study schools) in different parts of the State met the needs of students at educational risk and how the strategies developed in response to the policy may have been affected by local contextual factors. District Offices were asked to identify primary schools suitable for research using snowball sampling based on the criterion that schools selected for interview were category 5 schools (schools with student enrolments between 300 and 700) with low H index scores[1] and had begun planning to develop their own policies and strategies for enacting the SAER Policy.

The Principal of each case study school was interviewed and, again using snowball sampling, the Principal nominated micro site participants for the research. These included the school's Deputy Principal, SAER coordinator and two teachers chosen according to the high ratio of students at educational risk in their classroom. The use of purposeful sampling at the macro level (Central Office) and meso level (Districts) and snowball sampling to select micro (school) respondents aimed to provide maximum variation in the different geographical locations of level 5 H index schools of WA. To ensure confidentiality respondents and institutions were given a code or pseudonym. The code represented the respondent's educational position and the number identified the case study. For example: SSM1 correlated to District representative (Student Service Manager) from case study one, PR3 was the Principal from case study three. Teachers and respondents from Central Office (Senior Education Officers) were given pseudonyms. This paper moves beyond the specific findings within each case site (see Mosen 2006 for individual case studies) to focus on the emerging meta level themes.

Emergent Themes

The meta level analysis of the research findings revealed the complexity of issues related to policy for students at educational risk in WA. Three key themes that emerged from the analysis were: *accountability; social justice;* and *inter-agency collaboration.*

Accountability

The concept of accountability was a strong theme that emerged from the analysis of the interview and documentary data across all levels of the policy trajectory and contexts of the 'policy cycle'. It was found that the term 'accountability' held different meanings and values for participants along the policy trajectory. The two prominent sub-strands associated with accountability were the conflict and contentions associated with *decentralization* and the concept of *performativity*.

Decentralization

Global reforms in education that promote economic ideologies have influenced the *modus operandi* of educational systems and institutions. Decentralization has been foregrounded as a process to strengthen accountability in a bid to improve educational services. Karlsen's (2000)

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[1] An H index score is a numerical figure, formulated from eight criteria based on social factors, which include parental occupation; education; income; family stability; tenancy; accommodation; English competency; and Aboriginality. The lower the 'H' Index figure the more disadvantaged a school is considered.

distinction between decentralization as 'delegation' (where schools are given the responsibility to perform specific tasks usually defined by the central authorities who maintain overall control) and decentralisation as 'devolution' (where there is a shift in power, authority and responsibility from central authorities to school sites thus increasing the independence of schools) was evident within the research findings. The research findings revealed that for school administrators, the practicalities of decentralization as 'devolution' had not provided the liberation of greater independence and flexibility to schools that it had promised, as emphasized by one Principal:

> Devolution and autonomy for schools only works to a certain extent. In our school planning processes, meetings and planning days we are very limited as to what priorities and initiatives we come up with ourselves for our school when we have so much stuff mandated from Central Office … We are already overloaded before we start looking at what are the local issues we would like to take on as our own initiatives. (PR1)

Despite continuing policy discourses of decentralization (devolution and delegation), commentators are increasingly noting clear trends towards re-regulation or enhanced control by central authorities in recent years (Ball 2001, 2003; Henry, Lingard, Rizvi, & Taylor 1999, Karlsen 2000; Ranson 2003). This study revealed that the SAER Policy sits within the tensions between decentralization and re-regulation. From the perspective of macro level respondents, processes of decentralization were linked to improving accountability processes to monitor District and school performance. For micro level respondents devolution was perceived as a *passing the buck* scenario as Districts and schools now not only were responsible for enacting Education Department policies but also finding solutions to problems created by systemic practices within the public education system, as exemplified by one Principal:

> To a certain extent I see some of these policy developments as a little bit of passing the buck. The department identifies a problem; and then thinks 'what are we going to do about it? Let's make a policy and send it out to schools and let's make the schools, and in particular the Principal's, accountable for implementing this policy' and there, we have done our job. (PR1)

The SAER Policy text provided "guidelines for schools on how the policy statements can be incorporated into existing school procedures, so that accountability can be demonstrated" (EDWA 1998b:8). This top-down approach to policy that insisted on a 'bottom-up' method of accountability by schools functioned to distance the Education Department from the complex realities of the policy, but allowed it to ensure conformity by schools and retain control as identified by one Student Service Manager:

> How it [the SAER Policy and *Curriculum Framework*] actually happens and what you actually do in a very practical way tend to be left up to schools to work out … we tend to underestimate their ability to be able to have good practices in schools and that they have achieved the indicators in the policy. (SSM3)

Arguably, whilst the SAER Policy discourses highlighted a level of decentralization of decision-making, there were also clear elements of re-regulation. However, the study pointed to the irony of purported decentralization, which was initiated from a top-down model of policy.

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Performativity

A second major sub-strand relating to accountability was the concept of 'performativity' which was evident in three issues related to the SAER Policy: *national standardised testing*; c*onformity through self-regulation* in schools; and the creation of *fabrications*.

National Standardised Testing

Monitoring the performance of schools and teachers to improve education standards was an important concept identified by all respondents as influencing the WA SAER Policy. From a macro level respondent (Central Office), the concept of accountability was described as a powerful 'policy lever' to ensure policy enactment. At the meso and micro levels, respondents reported a strong belief that the Commonwealth Minister for Education in the mid 1990s (Kemp) was concerned over students' literacy ability, students' employability and national economic prosperity (Black 2002), and this national level concern acted as a catalyst for the SAER Policy in WA, for example one teacher said: "It was Peter Kemp in his discovery that children were leaving school not reading and that they slipped through the system too easily" (Jenny). One Principal claimed that there had been a fair bit of pressure coming from the government, in particular Dr Kemp's [national] testing regime, and this had "been driving the State system, or forcing us really, to bring in these policies and to show we are meeting the needs of these kids". (PR1). A second Principal described the [national] testing regime as a tool:

> To see if we can do something to show that we are trying to improve and that we are
> not any worse than the other states … Its monitoring standards, but not monitoring
> standards to improve the kids as much as to show that we are doing it. (DP4)

Arguably, Minister Kemp's push for testing using benchmark results in the area of literacy and numeracy to monitor education standards was a key force in shaping the direction and governance of education in Australia. His literacy concerns were compounded by the findings of the *Western Australian Child Health Survey* (ICHR 1997), that 90 percent of students were functioning below average in English. The outcome of these influences was that literacy formed a key component of the SAER Strategy. The links between 'at-risk' and literacy were clearly illustrated throughout the SAER Policy text through phrases such as: "curriculum context and delivery has a focus on literacy" (EDWA 1998c:4) and "schools maintain a focus on literacy and numeracy for students at educational risk" (EDWA 1998d:1). The impact of a national standardised testing approach to improve educational standards is threefold. First, using such testing to improve standards creates a reductionist approach to 'at-risk' and education (Comber Green, Lingard, & Luke 1998) where learning is diminished to a number score (De Lissovoy & McLaren 2003) that lends itself to comparisons and competition. Second, the approach adopted reduced the conceptualisation of 'at-risk' to a narrow literacy agenda, and therefore the broad continuum of factors that create the 'at-risk' category became inconsequential (Ball 1998) as student failure became focused on only one aspect of risk, literacy attainment. Third, the approach adopted created a shift in resource placement to support students 'at-risk' from one

based on social justice to one that limited the conceptualisation of social justice to economic ideologies.

Conformity through Self-Regulation

Tensions and contradictions existed within the SAER Policy around global ideologies relating to 'performativity and accountability'. The policy documentation detailed a model where the mandatory status of SAER Policy and its alliance with other accountability processes aimed to generate conformity, compliance and accountability across a range of school operations and throughout the different levels of the Education Department. Both macro and meso level respondents claimed that the Education Department was using the SAER Policy as "an insurance policy" (SSM2) whereby schools and teachers took on the ownership for addressing the needs of students and at the same time were made accountable for their actions through the policy's inter-linkage with the Department's *Accountability Framework*.

 Within this research, procedures involving self-regulation became embedded in the culture of schools and created mechanisms of accountability that converged on monitoring professional performance (Ball 2003; Ranson 2003; Vidovich & Slee 2001). The use of pointers and indicators to identify the roles and responsibilities for different levels within the Education Department were emphasised in the policy's philosophy through statements such as: "the need for the whole school/district/central office teams to be committed to making a difference" (EDWA 1989c:2) and "each level of the system must take responsibility for its contribution to improve outcomes" (EDWA 1998b:6). Nevertheless, micro site respondents felt that in practice the policy was specifically directed towards teachers and school performance rather than the purported 'holistic approach' promoted in the policy text. Many respondents claimed that they were carrying out their professional commitments towards students 'at-risk' and that the Education Department needed to demonstrate more trust in their staff, as illustrated by one teacher: "policy or no policy, students at educational risk need to be taken care of. I do not need a policy to do that, as a teacher it's my job … if they could just trust us" (Mary).

In response to the SAER Policy, all case study schools developed processes for identifying students 'at-risk' and changing school procedures to utilise resources more effectively. Frequently these processes were embedded into School Development Plans, linked to and monitored through teacher performance management processes, as described by one principal: "in our 2000-2001 school Curriculum Improvement Plan all of the students at educational risk actions were required to be part of each teacher's performance management" (PR3). Within all case studies, examples of 'control de control' (Du Gay 1996) via self-regulation existed with the establishment of school-based SAER Committees which controlled granting of resources and which also monitored outcomes. However, the feeling of being under constant self–appraisal and a focus of surveillance created tensions, which if left unresolved can result in 'fabrications' (Ball 2003).

Fabrications

The use of performance indicators within the policy text was an attempt by the Education Department to control policy meaning and enactment through micro everyday practices (Symes & Preston 1997). However, it was found that there were resistance and power struggles that created 'toxic cultures' (Ball 2003) and 'fabrications' (Foucault 1980), within and between different levels of the policy trajectory. Micro level teachers had found many of the processes within the SAER Policy and the inter-linkages with the outcomes–based *Curriculum Framework* (Curriculum Council 1998), daunting, time consuming, difficult and to significantly to add to their workloads. The following comment encapsulates these views from teachers at micro sites:

> While we are trying to implement outcomes and trying to work out how to do it, that takes up a lot of time and when it comes to portfolios you are expected to tag work and you've got to work out how that fits in with outcomes. It does take a lot of time. (Lyn)

A broad range of resistance and fabrications were revealed which included ignoring changes in policy; failing to conduct regular 'at-risk' reviews due to time restraints; creating negative environments to undermine the policy; failing to carry out 'at-risk' processes identified through School Development Plans; adopting appropriate language without changing pedagogies; and failing to write Individual Education Plans. Some teachers admitted that they were "just going through the motions" (Tina) and that "many teachers were in survival mode because they had too much to do and so many were only doing the minimum due to the increased workload" (Wendy) whereas a third stated:

> We see these kinds of things coming in all the time so us older teachers go 'okay, another one' so we will just sit back quietly and let it all wash around us and it will be gone in five years. (Cathy)

Power struggles over policy were also evident at the Corporate Executive level of the Education Department. One Central Office respondent claimed that at times facing the different power struggles within the Education Department was intimidating as "there was so much invested in this [policy] from our very powerful people that there were a few times where it was pretty scary about pulling it off and maintaining it and holding your ground while things shook underneath you" (Alice). Another stated:

> In the Corporate Executive I came up against those who were allied with the empires or against those who would be perfectly keen to do something to ensure that I fell on my head … there was a lot of effort by certain people to ensure that I got pushed back into my box and the lid firmly slammed shut. (SEO)

Within this research the construction of 'quality' as 'accountability' was contested at local case study school sites. The findings of this study parallel similar research findings that in the reading of policy text and the commitment to enactment there is no guarantee hegemonic knowledge is the outcome as policy can be undermined by human agency (Apple 1993; Ball 1994; Bowe *et al* 1992; Clegg 1989; Codd 1988, Foucault 1980).

Social Justice

A second theme emerging from the data was the redefining and reframing of the concept of social justice in the SAER Policy. This research found that operating within the policy were two competing discourses – economic rationales and social justice – with economic discourses being privileged over social justice. This hierarchical structure of discourses within the policy created a dilemma that centred on how to bring together issues associated with 'equality' and 'difference' in education and social policy (Taylor & Singh 2005). Global ideologies of reform which promote equity and efficiency as being compatible and able to "co-exist" (OECD 1997:8) were not evident within the WA SAER Policy process, as the simultaneous presence of both discourses created tensions between ideologies and practices at local sites.

The SAER Policy process aimed to improve the provision and delivery of programs for all 'at-risk' students through system-wide strategic planning and new processes of resource redistribution. This restructuring created a shift in the conceptualisation of identifying and resourcing 'at-risk' from specific *groups* within the community towards a focus on the *individual* 'at-risk'. Removing the constraints that categorised students into 'at-risk' *groups* allowed for a broader spectrum of 'at-risk' categories to be officially recognised, and for more students to be eligible to access resources (ICHR 1997; Taylor & Henry 2003). However, as identified by Taylor and Henry (2003) in their analysis of Queensland's 2010 Education Strategy, the concept of social justice has been reconstructed. Underachieving students now become categories by one all-encompassing label (Taylor & Henry 2003; Taylor & Singh 2005) regardless of the factors that create risk (Placier 1993; Watson 1993) and, without giving attention to environmental conditions that may create problems for these students (Natriello, McDill and Pallas 1990; Te Riele 2006). Two dilemmas emerged from the research findings related to these new policy processes. First, the same level of resourcing under the previous system for supporting identified group of 'at-risk' students now had to accommodate a broader range of students 'at-risk'. Second, although a broader spectrum of students' needs were now identifiable, processes for addressing issues related to 'at-risk' focused "attention onto teachers and classroom practices" (Taylor & Henry 2003:356) rather than the multiple factors that contributed to students being 'at-risk'.

This availability and utilization of resources highlighted the tentative relationship between social justice and economic rationales and exposed the different power relationships operating within the policy. There were contradictory discourses between the philosophy of the policy and the practicality of its enactment. For example, the pamphlet entitled *Making the Difference* (EDWA 1998e:1) stated that quality support involves "ensuring that the needs of students at educational risk are identified and addressed by providing equitable provision and quality support, resources and services" and that schools should "link resource allocation to planning and focus resource usage on areas of greatest needs" (EDWA 1998f:7). However, highlighted throughout the policy were clear statements of where schools should allocate resources, such as: "resources are allocated in accordance with EDWA policies, priorities and planning" (EDWA 1998c:6) and that student performance across the department involved "reporting on standards of student achievement in numeracy and literacy against the Outcomes and Standards Framework and national benchmarks" (EDWA 1997a:23). What is evident in the SAER Policy documentation is that schools are expected to become more innovative in restructuring, redirecting and reorganising their current skills and resources to meet desired policy outcomes. This was exemplified throughout the SAER Policy, in statements where schools are told to: "build from what is already available in terms of staff, monetary and community resources" (EDWA 1998f:7)

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and "schools are recognising the realities of 'doing more with less' and are making some pragmatic decisions about how to best utilise scarce resources to ensure positive longer term outcomes" (EDWA 1998f:7).

These tensions and contradictions between resource placement to help individual students overcome disadvantage on the one hand, and the need for schools to become more creative in their placement of diminishing resources, are relived throughout the policy, and were found to create problems for micro site practitioners. The Education Department's new system-wide planning to improved service delivery and utilize resources more effectively for students 'at-risk' were found to continue to restrict students' opportunities to access resources. Teachers hoped that the SAER Policy would provide resources and assistance to help students who struggled within public education, but the reality of the policy for micro level practitioners was that it equated to more work and less support. One teacher summed up the thoughts of several respondents:

> In theory, the Education Department again is covering its butt. In practise, it's all being set up for the children, but unless they put all the other things in place, like finance, extra teachers and resources then it does not really work. It is very good if you can make a policy but you have to follow it up with all the other things. (Cathy)

In response to the SAER Policy all schools became inventive in establishing ways to make the educational dollar stretch further. All case study schools in this research focused their funds to support students in the kindergarten to Year 2 age groups. Consequently, teachers of the middle and upper primary classes lacked the resources to help students identified as 'at-risk'. Even under the Education Department's new comprehensive system-wide policy approach towards students 'at-risk' limited restricted resources led to some students' learning needs being determined to be of a higher priority than others. One of the biggest dilemmas in resource placement was whether to support students who were identified as chronically 'at-risk' and who after extensive intervention over several years had made minimal progress or, whether to place resources where they could *make the difference.* This was illustrated in research data from one respondent who was told that two students in her class were academically below the 'students at educational risk' group and therefore could not access a literacy support programs, and thus she asked the question: "Who are we catering for and what happens to these kids who are further behind?" (Lisa).

It was found that each of the case study sites adopted the policy from a different perspective, all with the intention of promoting a socially justice approach to support their students 'at-risk' population. The different approaches included one school establishing a Leadership Model, a second focused on social and self-worth programs, a third established a whole school Learning Environment Model and the fourth a collaborative approach which centred on literacy. The analysis also revealed common practices across case studies that included: creating school-based SAER policies in response to local community needs; establishing new processes for resource distribution; implementing application processes for obtaining classroom support; and focusing on Early Intervention Programs and literacy.

Two major contextual factors emerged from the research data that separated metropolitan and country schools. These factors were (1) the limited opportunities of country schools to access a broad range of government and non-government resources and services and (2) the issue of

student behaviour management. Country respondents believed that the more remote a school was from the Education Department's Central Office the less access they had to support services. This lack of services was deemed to create disparity in terms of social justice and an area that warranted attention by the Education Department. The research also revealed that, although challenging student behaviour was highlighted in all case studies, it came to the forefront as a prominent issue for country case studies and as a result behaviour management strategies were more openly and rigorously integrated into their school-based SAER policies.

It was found that within the new framework of resource distribution promoted through the SAER Policy social justice becomes marginalised as a major educational goal as it is reframed to conform within government policy cycles and budgets. The shift in Commonwealth Government funds to support students 'at-risk' from the *Commonwealth Disadvantaged Schools Program* (established in 1971), which provided equality of opportunity for those disadvantaged due to low socio-economic status, ethnicity, geographic location, cultural aspects and linguistic factors to the *Commonwealth Literacy and Numeracy Program* in 1997, exemplifies this reframing of social justice. Although this research found that changes schools made to their operational and management structures did make a difference for some students, the policy did not make the difference for *all* students identified within the 'at-risk' continuum. A new conceptualization of social justice had emerged that centred on developing effective schools for the benefit of all rather than a focus on supporting the disadvantaged (Taylor & Singh 2005). This finding parallels the findings of Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995) in their book *Markets, Choice and Equity in Education* that new structures for school-based management, such as devolution, and funding arrangements, frequently result in issues of social justice and equity being left to chance within schools due to 'redistribution-recognition dilemmas'. In the presented study issues related to equity created disparity at micro sites as schools became increasingly responsible for promoting social justice within a culture of performativity where competing priorities and limited resources brought into question the compatibility of equity and efficiency.

Inter-Agency Collaboration

Inter-agency collaboration has emerged as a new policy trend that aims to forge links between the ideologies of social cohesion, economic prosperity and policy uniformity (Coffield 2000). Effective inter-agency collaboration formed a key concept used to construct the SAER Policy and was identified as a valuable asset to improve outcomes for 'at-risk' students. In this, the Education Department's SAER Policy mirrored new global shifts in social policy in two ways. First, the SAER Policy promoted a bottom-up approach to inter-agency collaboration where schools became responsible for developing links to other agencies. Second, the SAER Policy failed to tackle the broader socio-economic structures that create educational risk and social exclusion.

Recent research into social policies has focused on a 'bottom up' mechanism of social partnerships which forge new working practices between welfare, social and education institutions to address issues related to 'social exclusion' (Bagley, Ackerley & Rattray 2004; Clegg & McNulty 2002; Griffiths 2000; Milbourne, Macrae & Maguire 2003; Tett, Crowther & O'Hara 2003). Education is accredited as a key component within this new framework of social policy (Coffield 2000) by promoting social justice through rebuilding communities, both economically and socially. However, opponents of this restructuring in social policy (Frazer, 1997; Milbourne *et al* 2003; Tett *et al* 2003; Thrupp 2001) claim that it maintains a deficit model

of disadvantage for two reasons. First, the disadvantaged are deemed responsible for, and expected to find solutions to, factors that create 'failure'; second, it avoids any analysis of the socio-economic structures that create social exclusion and social disadvantage.

From the findings of this research it emerged that for meso and micro respondents, although theoretically inter-agency collaboration seemed a logical and positive approach to address issues of 'at-risk', in practice it had been a difficult concept to execute. Constraints on successful inter-agency practices found in this study were also reminiscent of other research into inter-agency collaboration (Bagley *et al* 2004; Clegg & McNulty 2002; Gilchrist 1998; Griffiths 2000; Jones 2000; Milbourne *et al* 2003; Seddon, Billett & Clemans 2004; Tett *et al* 2003; Watts 2001). Constraints related to difficulties in communication, (inflexible) professional boundaries, different goals, agendas, power struggles, lack of appropriate resourcing and different funding mechanisms. All of these constraints created diminished collective action. As a public service provider, the Education Department, and moreover schools, have no power, authority or influence over the operations of other agencies. The support schools did receive was frequently of an advisory or consultative nature with very little real funding or resources accessible to assist schools, as outlined by respondents: "There is very little inter-agency funding going into our schools … Mostly they have access to advice, consultative support, and very little real on the ground dollars or assistance that would actually make a difference" (SSM1); "How it all translates back in schools is it always comes back to a lack of resources … It is always a prioritising situation that's needed" (SSM3); "This is an area that really still needs to be addressed because we seem to be calling for assistance and asking for help from other agencies and sometimes we get it and sometimes we don't" (PR1); and "[it is] extremely difficult to get all the agencies talking to each other and the school and parents are caught in the middle" (PR3).
Tett *et al* (2003:50) claim that within this new social policy "professionals are expected to respond to problems defined and understood elsewhere" and collaboration is viewed as unproblematic and easily achievable. This approach ignores the complexity of collective action, especially in matters related to power and equity (Griffiths 2000).

Inter-agency collaboration was found to be a complex, messy and contested terrain and oversimplified in the SAER Policy documentation. The SAER Policy text acknowledged that inter-agency collaboration was "a complex task" (EDWA 1998c:15) and difficult to put into practice but contradictions were also evident. The policy text, on the one hand stated that Central Office was responsible for "facilitating interagency cooperation in the provision of services to students at educational risk" (EDWA 1998b:7) and yet on the other hand the document advocated a 'bottom up' approach whereby schools were to "actively collaborate with agencies to provide comprehensive and efficient services and support for students at educational risk" (EDWA 1998b:10). Micro level respondents believed that there was a lack of guidance by Central Office which inhibited effective inter-agency collaboration, a perspective emphasized by Anning (2001), Bagley *et al* (2004) and Griffiths (2000), who found that interventionist programmes frequently failed to provide advice and recommendations on how to establish and deliver effective inter-agency collaboration. The findings of this study resonate with those of other research studies (Jones 2000; Griffiths 2000; Clegg & McNulty 2002) that it is the commitment and qualities of individuals, and their willingness to work outside of their agency mandates, which facilitates successful partnerships.

The WA Family and Children Services (renamed the Department of Community Development in 2002) was an organisation explicitly identified at the meso and micro levels of the policy process as an example of the difficulties in collaboration. Although this organisation had the same vested interest in supporting students 'at-risk' as the Education Department, respondents described them as "hopeless and useless" (DP4), "great with kids [but] leave a lot to be desired with communication skills" (DP1) and were "a hopeless organisation …[who were] terribly out of line in terms of their accountability" (DP2). Bureaucratic disputes and incongruous modes of operation were attributed with preventing effective collaboration, as outlined by one Principal:

> Family and Children Services are a problem. They do not seem to have either the will or the ability to work with schools in terms of developing kids educational skills…they just seem totally unable to recognize that it does need a coordinated approach. (PR4)

One meso respondent was more empathetic in their support of Family and Children Services claiming that within this organisation "There were a lot of over worked people doing a huge job… [However] at the same time there is no real protocol for communication between the Education Department and the Family and Children Services" (SAERPO4). This paper now concludes by revisiting the research questions.

Conclusion

The aim of the research reported here was to analyse the Western Australian Education Department's *Students at Educational Risk: Making the Difference* Policy from its origins and intent through the production of the policy text to the subsequent practices in WA Schools, focusing on the period from 1997 to 2002. An analysis of the Education Department's SAER Policy process pointed to both the reflection and negotiation of globally prevalent ideologies at Commonwealth, State and local levels in Australia. First, as advocated by the OECD (1989), in the WA SAER Policy, issues of equity and efficiency were viewed by the macro level respondents, as compatible and able to co-exist. Second, in the WA SAER Policy, there was an assumption that improving education standards through knowledge and training would help alleviate students' 'at-risk' factors and social exclusion. Third, in the WA SAER Policy, social justice remained an important purpose of education but was to be 'managed' within government policy cycles and budgets. Fourth, in the WA SAER Policy, central authorities maintained control through techniques of re-regulation, principally through higher accountability, that enabled 'loose-tight steering' (Taylor & Henry 2003).

To examine the WA SAER Policy process, research questions and data were structured using Bowe *et al* (1992) and Ball's (1994) 'policy cycle' model of contexts: influences, policy text production; practices; outcomes; and political strategies. Under the 'context of influence' the research question examined the factors influencing the production of the WA Education Department's SAER Policy. At all levels of the policy trajectory, improving educational standards and processes of accountability were identified as the primary influences behind the SAER Policy. From the macro (Central Office) perspective the aim of the policy was to establish a system-wide coordinated approach offering greater flexibility in service delivery to meet the broadness of 'at-riskness' and make a difference for students 'at-risk'. From the meso (District) and micro (school) perspectives the main influence behind the SAER Policy was improving student literacy skills and learning outcomes by streamlining accountability to monitor the

effectiveness of schools. Thus, the main influences behind the policy became increasingly associated with improving accountability rather than addressing disadvantage or 'at-risk' factors for students.

In analysing the 'context of policy text production' of the WA SAER Policy text the research question investigated the nature of the policy text and how it was constructed. The triangulation of data from interviews and policy documents found that there were two discourses – social justice and economic rationalism – operating within the policy text. These discourses were found to be competing, contradictory and had a hierarchical structure with economic rationalism privileged over social justice. At all levels of the policy trajectory respondents wanted to believe that the SAER Policy was associated with social justice. Nevertheless, an analysis of the discourse of the policy text revealed that social justice had been reframed by the more dominant, near hegemonic, discourses of economic rationalism. This dominance was highlighted in the policy text in four ways. First, there was a distinct inter-linkage between accountability, student under-achievement and the consequences for economic growth. Second, students were identified as being 'at-risk' by their achievement of outcomes and values set out of a standardised curriculum rather than the multi-dimensional risk factors created by society. Third, 'accountability' was used as the apparatus to create social change and promoted centralized control rather than micro level flexibility. Fourth, the policy text was developed from concepts of supporting students at educational risk via the restructuring of existing resources delivery.

The 'context of policy practices' research question focused on the effects of the SAER Policy on schools' operations and practices. It was found that the most common changes to case study practices related to student identification, resource redistribution and the impact on teachers' workloads. All case study schools adopted different innovative strategies in implementing the policy but there were common policy practices across all case study schools. These included: a focus on literacy and early intervention; establishing SAER committees; and new processes for resource distribution. The impact of the enactment of the policy was that the concept of 'at-risk' became narrowed to a literacy focus. The SAER Policy processes were found to be time consuming and created extra responsibilities in teacher workloads, which lead to resistance to policy implementation at micro sites. The impact of restricted resources led to some students' learning needs being determined to be of a higher priority than others. Disparities between country and metropolitan case studies emerged. Country locations believing the Education Department lacked a true understanding of the needs of country schools and the local communities they served which created disparity in the provision and access of human resources between metropolitan and country schools.

In respect to the research questions: 'What were the outcomes of the SAER Policy in terms of its impact on social justice?', and 'What strategies could be employed to further enhance social justice for students 'at-risk'?', the analysis of the WA SAER Policy revealed a high degree of correlation between changing global ideologies related to the purpose of education and State policy processes related to students 'at-risk'. Within a WA setting the research found that the prevailing economic rationale has reshaped the discourses of 'at-risk' from the needs of the *individual* to the needs of a *nation*, and further narrowed the agenda towards a literacy focus. Traditional social justice principles now fell to the responsibility of schools in how they distribute resources. It is from these perspectives that this research argues that the SAER Policy marginalised the needs of some students at educational risk. Working within limited resource

boundaries, schools prioritized the needs of students and placed resources where they would *make a difference*, predominantly in the areas of literacy and early intervention. However, restructuring existing resources, schools plans, and programs primarily towards students at the bottom end of the 'at-risk' continuum resulted in less funds being available to cater for other areas of risk. Social justice discourses promoted in the policy aimed to support students at educational risk through providing schools with greater flexibility in localised decision making to meet student needs. Nevertheless, the more dominant economic discourse reframed the concept of social justice to one focused on standards and outcomes. The policy's emphasis on standards, accountability and outcome indicators became tools to create social change. Arguably, these components of the policy's discourses linked it with global economic ideologies of education that promoted the de-professionalization of teachers (Tomlinson 2001).

The study's use of two different theoretical positionings to illuminate the policy process highlighted that contemporary global ideologies and different Commonwealth, State and local level agendas all influence educational policies. This study into the WA SAER Policy found the policy process had been complex, problematic and a 'contested terrain' (Ozga 2000) that was recontextualised, struggled over, challenged and resisted at all stages of the policy trajectory. These findings paralleled other research into policy processes conducted for example by Ball (1994) and Vidovich (1999) who have reported that policy is recontextualised through the policy trajectory at different levels. There are a number of implications of the findings for policy and practice. For example, there is a need to support new policies with appropriate financial and human resources.; to identify and accommodate those chronically' at-risk' students who might require more extensive intervention; to develop alternative models for policy enactment which are more closely aligned with daily practices of teachers; and to enhance inter-agency collaboration.

As issues associated with accountability and improving educational standards continue to remain a focal point of educational reforms, the relationship between the concept of 'at-risk' and the broader canvas of social justice becomes complex and problematic with no easy solutions. Providing social justice is not just related to obtaining the appropriate resources but involves recognising oppression through the dominance of cultural imperialism existing in educational theory, policy and practices (Eisenberg 2006; Young 2006). The construction of 'quality' as 'accountability' and issues surrounding the compatibility of 'equity' and 'efficiency' as being able to "co-exist" (OECD 1997:8) were found within the SAER Policy process to create contradictions and tensions between global ideologies and micro site practices. Current ideologies focusing on the economic purpose of education that support discourses of excellence, accountability, efficiency, competition and self-management, have prevented the establishment of a coherent, cohesive and effective policy that would meet the needs of all students. Very little progress or attention has been given to creating more and different educational environments matched to individual needs. Therefore, there will continue to be a proportion of the school population who fail to thrive in the current education system and who fail to receive the educational programs and environments needed to enhance learning.

In conclusion, despite the messiness of the policy process revealed in the policy trajectory, some positive changes were evident. Even with the challenges of perpetual policy reforms, noticeable recognition should be given to case study schools and more specifically the role of teachers in their innovative approaches towards enacting the SAER Policy to support students at educational

risk. The domain of education continues to thrive as a dynamic entity where teachers at the grassroots level consistently rise to the challenge to provide the best opportunities and environment for students within the constraints of 'top-down' policy and government budget cycles.

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